

DISMANTLING THE HERITAGE OF APARTHEID IN SOUTH AFRICA'S UNIVERSITIES

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In South Africa, there are intense discussions of the future of higher education and many major changes have already been implemented. South Africa's problems are acute, but they are also part of a wider sense of crisis in the sector that became particularly apparent at the dawn of the new millennium. For example, the Japanese literary scholar, Masao Miyoshi (2000: 7), claimed: 'Higher education is undergoing a sea change. Everyone knows and senses it, few try to comprehend its scope or imagine its future'. I'm not sure there have been too few attempts to understand or envisage the future; rather the problem is that there is little consensus on how we are to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Such are the rapidity of the changes thrust upon us and so quickly have we had to respond that many universities are in a state of shock, or to use Alvin Toffler's (1970) well-worn expression, 'future shock'. At any one time, those in the foaming brine - university teachers, administrators, researchers and students - are not quite sure whether we are sinking or swimming.

The Legacy

Despite the generality of the crisis in higher education, South Africa's problems are particularly pressing mainly because of the legacy of the apartheid system. A number of key national features, specified below, are evident.

Black South African primary and secondary education was and remains poor, particularly in the state sector. The apartheid state condemned black Africans¹ to be hewers of wood and drawers of water. In a notorious intervention, on 17th September 1953, the Minister of Native Affairs, Hendrik Verwoerd, asked the parliament: 'What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice?' (quoted in Lehohla 2006). Thereafter mathematics and science education was severely restricted for black school children. Given the long lead-time needed to train teachers (and other constraining factors) this deficiency is probably the single most important hurdle to surmount.

¹ I've used the simple descriptors 'black' to signify those with African heritage who are phenotypically dark-skinned, 'brown' to signify those of Indian descent or mixed heritage and 'white' to signify those of European heritage who are phenotypically light-skinned. Classifying people like this is offensive, but necessary to understand the apartheid legacy.

Another constraining legacy was that after 1963 the limited access blacks had to the current institutions of higher education was further restricted by legislation. While new race-specific institutions were constructed, they were often in remote areas of the country or in the newly fabricated homeland states (called 'Bantustans'). The general standard of higher education available in a number of these institutions was poor and, even when competent, was limited to politically acceptable subjects and courses.

There were a number of important exceptions to this picture. The pioneer distance learning institution, the University of South Africa (UNISA) provided a significant outreach to aspiring blacks and reached into the very heart of the repressive apparatus, for example on Robben Island, where political prisoners were housed. Universities segregated by race were also not entirely compliant with the apartheid state. In Natal, good quality education was provided in the institutions designed for Indians. Fort Hare (in the Eastern Cape) was able to look back to an independent past of black self-improvement, though it is experiencing considerable difficulty as it seeks to recover that positive legacy. In the 1980s, at the University of Western Cape, designed for the coloured (Creole) people, a radical Vice-Chancellor was able to turn the institution into a centre of radical opposition to the government and critical scrutiny of its policies.

Despite these counter examples in 1994, when the post-apartheid government was formed, the general picture of the country's 36 higher educational institutions can be described as follows:

- About 10, largely white, institutions located in the big cities or fashionable small towns offer high quality, internationally recognised, education. The medium of

instruction was either Afrikaans or English - though increasingly Afrikaans has been dethroned in the lecture theatre.

- A number of reasonable quality institutions for black and brown South Africans, segregated by race.
- Some very poor institutions providing low-grade certification, particularly in teaching and theology.

How best to transcend this legacy was far from clear, but four crucial responses, indicated below, developed in the post-apartheid period:

1. Merging And Reshaping The Existing Institutions

Led by a strong, able, intellectually articulate minister of education, Kader Asmal, all the 36 institutions (covering universities and technikons, elsewhere known as polytechnics) were reshaped to form 22 new institutions. Some were basically left alone, but told to change their admissions and other practices. Others were merged across the binary divide (university/technikons). Some crossed racial and language divides. Some linked institutions that were geographically quite distant. A few were told to take on some subjects and to discard others. This restructuring of higher education would merit a paper in itself. Suffice it to say that this was a fundamental shake-up of the system and was designed to put the segregated university past into the historical dustbin.

2. An Attempt To Make South African Universities More Socially Diverse

In many Western universities, the historical head start in political power given to, or assumed by, white males resulted in their dominance of university admissions.

Women were regarded as fit only for housework or perhaps the marital bed. This was also historically true of South Africa, with the additional twist that, under Roman-Dutch law, women's civil rights were severely limited. Again, many disadvantaged racial and ethnic minorities (in South Africa *majorities*) were largely excluded from higher education.

The argument for increasing representation from previously disadvantaged groups is often made by reference to an unanswerable moral claim for social justice. This remains the key argument for supporting diversity in admissions and one that has been universally accepted in South African universities. But a more instrumental logic would focus the advantages of maximising talent and ability by extending the potential pool from which applicants are drawn. Previously, socially excluded groups produce highly motivated students determined to break out of historically closed ethnic laagers. For example, many Chinese students in California and many black students in South Africa have made considerable gains in social mobility through educational success. Because of their enthusiasm and motivation they are often attractive students to teach.

Generally, attempts to extend participation have a long way to go. However, there are at least two interesting comparative cases of 'over compensation'. Some 37 per cent of the University of California's 130,000 students are Asian Americans - about 2.5 times the proportion of that community graduating from Californian high schools. Similarly, 70 per cent of all undergraduates at the University of West Indies are women. The gender issue there is to try to activate male interest in attending university. The other probable effect in promoting social diversity is to trigger counter-reactions from traditional

pools of applicants. I can offer two under-researched examples:

- There are 6-7,000 well-qualified UK undergraduate candidates who study in the USA in high-fee institutions (Princeton, for example, charged US\$ 42,200 per annum in 2006), rather than go to nearly free prestigious institutions, like the old collegiate universities. With 50 per cent or so of entrants coming from state schools, apparently some parents believe that Oxford and Cambridge are becoming rather proletarianized and prefer a US Ivy League education for their privileged children.
- A similar example is the case of thousands of 'missing' high-scoring matriculants, overwhelmingly whites, in the South African system. Some may be taking the newly fashionable 'gap year'. Others might be emigrating with their parents. However, an unknown but probably significant number are undoubtedly leaving South Africa to go to institutions abroad rather than to those historically prestigious local universities that have responded to the demands for greater social diversity.

In South Africa the goal of diversity was officially sanctioned in several government reports (RSA 2001a, 2001b, 2002). These reports and reactions to them sharpened and polarised the debate. In brief, social diversity goals were constructed as matters of 'access and equity', but many academics in the stronger universities argued that enshrining these principles would lead to a collapse of standards. Those historically white institutions that had been left to function as autonomous entities were nonetheless officially enjoined to move to improve dramatically their numbers of black

students and staff. For example, the Rand Afrikaans University (now the University of Johannesburg, after merging with a formerly black institution) was told 'a great deal more still needs to be done to improve the demographic profile of the contact student body, which, to date remains as much as 70 per cent white' (RSA 2001b: 18). My former institution, the University of Cape Town, was given one cheer, but not three. It had achieved 'good progress in achieving equity in its student body', but 'much remains to be done with regard to its academic and administrative staff profiles' (RSA 2001b: 20).

The authors of the last-cited report were particularly strong in denouncing those institutions that sought to improve their social diversity merely through extending their distance learning operations and franchising subordinate colleges. The principal target of these comments was not difficult to spot. The University of Stellenbosch is located in a genteel, if somewhat 'disneyfied', Cape Dutch village in the heart of the verdant winelands. Registering black students in distance-learning programmes enlarged black numbers, but did not 'disturb' the pristine, white-dominated campus with too many black faces. This 'loophole' (if this strategy could be so designated) was blocked by the government insisting that the long-established and successful open university, UNISA, would be given virtual monopoly rights to run distance learning higher education.

What remained unstated, yet in a sense is an even bigger problem than diversifying the white universities, was the indifferent success and in some cases the outright failure of the historically black African,

coloured or Indian universities to transcend their own racialized, apartheid origins. There is a better record in the various tertiary institutions in Natal in spreading enrolments to the population at large, but institutions like Fort Hare, the University of Limpopo (formerly the University of the North), the University of Transkei and others remain stubbornly African-only.² Even the radical University of the Western Cape, whose appeal has transcended its coloured origins to include black students, has only managed to recruit 1 per cent of its student intake from the white population (11 per cent of the total population). So, although the political heat is on the historically white institutions, the problem of racially specific enrolments is much wider.

Despite these continuing difficulties in diversifying admissions, the eminent university administrator, Colin Bundy, provides a notably upbeat assessment: 'Overall changing patterns of access to higher education in South Africa amount to one of the most rapid and socially significant demographic changes, anywhere, in the contemporary era' (Bundy 2006: 12). The data he cites on the most politically sensitive indicator (the increase in the percentage of blacks enrolled) are, indeed startling (Table 1):

Table 1 African students' share of admissions in higher education

Date	% of enrolments	% in population
1993	40	n.d.
1999	59	n.d.
2002	65	79.5 (2006 estimates)

Sources: Bundy (2006); <http://www.southafrica.info/>

² Since 2004 Fort Hare was able to register a significant number of white students by taking over the East London campus of Rhodes University, which retreated to its small town origins in Grahamstown.

3. Centralizing And Consolidating Distance Learning

The figures in Table 1 are somewhat misleading in that blacks are concentrated in the weaker institutions and in the cheaper, distance learning, mode of delivery. The difference between 'contact' and 'distance' learning has been strongly reinforced in post-apartheid South Africa. Hardening the line between the two has been done for three reasons: (a) to expose, as mentioned, the use of distance learning options as a way white universities have used to increase social diversity while keeping the core campuses white; (b) to break up the complex mixed delivery of study modules offered by another university, Vista; and (c) to consolidate distance learning in one national institution - and in so doing renaming UNISA as 'The Open Learning University of South Africa'.

The thrust of these proposals were not in themselves strongly opposed. In its student body, the ground-breaking UNISA has remained and extended its comprehensive service to all South Africans, including many in the rural areas who would have limited access to local tertiary institutions. However, the recommendations to dismantle all other distance learning operations and to consolidate and centralise

them fell foul of more immediate political conflicts. One centred on the proposed change of name. Whereas 'UNISA' had a considerable history and brand that carried conviction, the 'Open Learning University of South Africa' did not. The second rested on the behaviour and conduct of the council of UNISA which, in a bold lunge towards Africanization, was captured by a controversial chairperson 'Caps' Motimele in 2003. He drew a large salary for his services despite being accused of sanctioning or participating in apparently corrupt conduct. He also sought to assume executive responsibility for the university in a manner unknown in other South African universities treating it, in effect, like he was the CEO of a private company. For example, in open defiance of the Minister's advice to await the completion of merger proposals, Motimele and the rest of the Council hired a new Vice-Chancellor, Barney Pitso, a former member of the Human Rights Commission. While Pitso was plausible-enough candidate, the manner and timing of his appointment were dubious.

By 2006, UNISA had shaken off these problems, merged with Vista (creating a truly multi-sited campus for the first time) and significantly enhanced its enrolments both in number and representativeness (Table 2).

Table 2 Number enrolled at UNISA by population group, 2005

Group	Head count	% of students	% in population
African/Black	128,045	57	79.5
White	61,378	27	9.2
Indian/Asian	22,697	10	2.5
Coloured	13,699	6	8.9
Unknown	605	0	0
Total	226,424	100	100

Sources: UNISA Annual Report (www.unisa.ac.za); <http://www.southafrica.info/>

Despite its impressive recovery from internal political turmoil UNISA now faces other challenges. For example, it provided an excellent service to rural areas using published lecture notes, textbooks and radio programmes. However, internationally distance learning is increasing taking place via the web, at present not accessible to those South Africans on the wrong side of the digital divide. There is thus an emerging and powerful tension between the need to keep up with international practices in open learning and the equally pressing need to fulfil the socially responsible ends of the UNISA's mission.

4. Making South Africa's Universities Financially Viable

In many countries, not least South Africa, universities are crucially dependent on public subsidy. In all countries, the levels of such subsidies are quite variable and are often capriciously changed according either to political prejudice or to other, wholly legitimate, claims on the public purse (for example, the need to support an even poorer school system). We know that as a proportion of wealth, the share going to higher education in South Africa is projected to fall. Despite South Africa's relative economic boom (4.9 per cent growth in 2005, the highest for 20 years) current projections are that most universities will experience a decline in their public subsidy. Given that most students are on 3-year or more courses, relying on annual shifts in budget is also an unhappy and unpredictable experience for publicly-funded universities in many countries.

For a long while those who believed in the sanctity of public service and ultimate goodwill of politicians relied on producing more and more cogent arguments to increase the state subsidy. Probably the best two economic arguments are: first, that countries need to position themselves favourably in the global knowledge

business or they will fail. And second, national and local economies are crucially reliant on the downstream spin-offs, in services, patents, small businesses, science parks and the like, that universities provide. To be sure, pleas to increase the state subsidy on economic grounds are not the sole basis for the universities' case for better treatment. Like anywhere else academics in South Africa can assemble some convincing arguments about inducing social cohesion, fostering humanist values and developing the moral responsibility of the country's emerging elite. They can urge that valuable and hard-earned intellectual capital should not be sold to global corporations or richer countries. They can remind the powerful of the intrinsic importance of knowledge 'for its own sake'.

However, South African universities have been remarkably slow to recognise that cogent economic, moral and social arguments do not necessarily have much political force. When all is said it remains clear that *all* arguments for increasing a state subsidy will fall at the final fence. Governments will have to respond to more pressing claims and voters who pay taxes will vote out governments that intend to increase public expenditure too greatly. Increased public subsidies are now a busted flush or a dead end. Those universities that will thrive will need to accept this completely - not, as is true of most universities with which I am familiar, in a half-hearted and whining manner. It follows that many alternative sources of support have to be activated. These are specified below:

- Gifts from alumni or wealthy individuals.
- Corporate sponsorship
- Increased fees for local students
- Increased fees from foreign or non-subsidized students

- Maximising the use of plant and equipment
- Private-public partnerships
- Setting up retail operations on and off campus
- Complete privatisation

For various reasons, these strategies for decreasing the reliance on state support are difficult to effect in South Africa. There is a reasonable tradition of *gift-giving from alumni* in South Africa, but as the demographic changes noted have kicked in and some of the established, normally white, South African graduates have emigrated, this source of funding has dried up. No doubt as black social mobility stabilizes, an equal measure of generosity will emerge but, at the moment, black South African graduates are at the stage of enjoying and consolidating their new-found wealth and status, rather than funding their alma maters. This is a characteristic of emerging elites in many countries, though I have heard a lot of hand-wringing about an 'entitlement culture' developing among South Africa's upwardly mobile population groups.

Corporate sponsors have been much more generous in South Africa, whether these are transnational corporations (DaimlerChrysler has supported Fort Hare, for example) or locally-based banks, retail chains, mining companies or insurance houses. Claims on corporate sponsorship have, however, been many-faceted and unceasing while the 'Mandela effect', which unlocked large sums from the corporations anxious to distance themselves from the apartheid past, has gradually worn off. As someone who frequently had to ask for money to fund worthy initiatives in my faculty I was conscious of a growing, if polite, refusal rate. We are, business people argued, 'already heavily taxed', or 'we are funding an AIDs or orphanage or welfare

system for our staff', etc., were characteristic answers.

Increasing fees for local students is one way forward, but there are serious constraints on that. The mechanisms for assessing parental incomes are particularly crude in South Africa and are difficult to protect against fraud. Increasing fees too greatly will provide an incentive to cheat by richer students while forcing poorer students to pay more. Most poor student are, in any case, supported by state grants, which means that increased fees would simply be a means of spending tax under a different heading. Whatever the limits to raising local fees, the South African government and universities have been remarkably generous in recognizing students from the remaining eight countries of the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) as local students. They have also failed to charge commercial fees for overseas students from non-SADCC countries. The latter remains a puzzling feature of South African university management and may reflect a lack of confidence in what they have to offer.

The other strategies for financial viability listed above are, in one form or another, associated with the gradual commercialization and corporatization of universities which has occurred in many, but by no means all, universities in Britain and the USA. The conference facilities of South African universities are underused and underdeveloped and they have failed to take advantage of the boom in tourism, including educational tourism. (In 1994, at the time of the election of Mandela's government tourist entries numbered 1 million; in 2005 they had risen to 7 million.) With the notable exception of the University of Pretoria, universities in South Africa are still locked into a modified, but barely modified, ivory tower tradition. This came as a pleasant surprise for the current author

(and old-fashioned academic), but I could not help express concern at the excessive reliance on state support that many of my colleagues seemed to take for granted.

Other Issues

It is possible that I have given the impression that bar a few hiccups these dramatic changes to South African higher education were accepted without demur. This is not the case. Perhaps surprisingly, the immediate opposition was expressed by a number of senior black educationalists. For example, Itumeleng Mosali (Vice-Chancellor of Technikon North West and Chairperson of the Association of Vice-Chancellors of Historically Disadvantaged Institutions), announced that: 'War has been declared on black and African higher education'. The recommendations of the government were described as 'politically insensitive'. He continued: 'How in a new democratic South Africa, anybody can dare to suggest the scaling down, swallowing up into white institutions or closing down of black universities and technikons while the white ones are left intact is incomprehensible' (*Mail and Guardian* 15-21 Feb 2002, p. 20). The charge that the formerly white institutions largely survived the restructuring proposal was true, but equally true was the fact, that they were also the financially and academically stronger bodies. It would have made little sense to discard viable and effective institutions, even if they needed serious reform.

Again, the rector of the Cape Peninsula Technikon stated on the radio that he would rather go to his grave than merge with his university neighbour to form a new comprehensive institution. Fortunately he did not have to carry out his promise as the minister beat a minor retreat in that case. On the whole, the comments of the formerly white institutions were more muted and generally concerned the pace rather than the direction of change. I should also make

clear that some progressive academics and university administrators were leading the charge, not merely responding to the government.

Conclusion

I have omitted many smaller debates (for example, on the role of private universities, on the optimal size and shape of a university, on regional coverage in South Africa, on vocational vs. pure education, on blue-skies vs. applied research, on academic freedom) in the interests of focusing on of the most important and pressing concerns in a post apartheid setting. The government squarely faced up to three key issues. How could the universities be made more socially diverse and accessible to those who were previously excluded? What was the role of distance education and how should it be organized? Finally, could the government merge and consolidate the system for financial and other reasons without incurring the wrath and resistance of the communities in whose name the anti-apartheid struggle was fought?

The implementation of the merger and restructuring proposals provided serious ethical dilemmas. Should the government close weak black institutions, which at least provided some kind of service to local communities, who would otherwise be cut off? Was the answer to merge historically-white with historically-black institutions, even if this resulted in inefficiencies, like having to manage satellite campuses spread over large distances? Should the government ellude the 'binary divide' between universities and technikons, or would this result in a confusion of mission? Would, finally, the pace of change, particularly in admissions, result in the collapse of standards and the loss of recognition for South African qualifications?

Some of these questions admit no easy

answer; others will have to await the passage of time to resolve. However, the boldness of the changes and the immediate and visible effects on South African campuses were certainly unexpected by those who imagined that the post-apartheid government would be content with business as usual in South African universities. Those in universities in other countries who face demands for more rapid change might examine the root-and-branch South African experience since 1994 with some profit.

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